

Underground Fire in Mo. Nears Nuclear Waste Dump

In the St. Louis area, a slow-burning underground fire is close to a vast store of nuclear waste buried in a federal Superfund site.

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The fire reportedly has been smoldering beneath a nearby landfill since at least 2010. The **Washington Post** reports that residents are afraid of what may happen if the fire — which is by some accounts as little as 1,500 feet away — reaches the **West Lake Landfill** in Bridgeton, Mo., a Superfund site filled with decades-old waste from the federal government's nuclear weapons program. Angry locals also think the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, which manages the site, hasn't done enough to stop the fire.

In December, the **EPA** announced that it would install a physical barrier in an effort to isolate the nuclear waste. The agency also said that it would put cooling loops and other engineering controls to prevent environmental impacts if the "subsurface smoldering event," as it's called, were to reach the waste. An EPA administrator told the Post that the barrier would take a year to build.

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But residents aren't comforted by that timetable, and think the government, despite years of warning, has done too little to stave off a possible environmental disaster. A **2014 St. Louis County Emergency Operations Plan**, obtained by a local TV station, reveals that local officials feared a "catastrophic event" with "a potential for radioactive fallout to be released in the smoke plume and spread throughout the region."

EPA says that the buried waste doesn't pose a health risk. Its air-monitoring tests, done in February 2015, showed that levels of radiation and volatile organic compounds in the area were similar to those usually found in industrial cities such as St. Louis. A **2014 analysis** by an EPA contractor concluded that the heat from the underground fire was too

low to ignite chemicals in the nuclear dump to trigger an explosion, or to cause other conditions that would carry radioactive particles off the site.

But those assurances have provided little peace of mind to local residents, who fear that they may already be suffering harm from radiation releases.

NEWS: Nuclear Waste Burial Sites May Become Leaky

“Every day, I live with anxiety,” one local woman told the Post. Her young son suffers from a mysterious autoimmune disorder that has caused his hair to fall out — one of numerous health problems that local residents say they’re already experiencing, according to the newspaper.

About 8,700 tons of nuclear waste, mixed with 39,000 tons of contaminated soil was moved to the Superfund site from another dump between July and October 1973, according to a **U.S. Nuclear Regulatory Commission report**. It was covered by a three-foot-deep layer of uncontaminated soil.

EPA may be running out of time to fix the problem. In early February, the U.S. Senate passed a bill introduced by Sens. Claire McCaskill, (D-Mo.), and Roy Blunt (R-Mo.), that would take control over the building remediation measures away from EPA and give it to the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers. The House hasn’t yet taken action on the legislation.

But Congress may bear some responsibility for the agency’s slowness. According to a **2015 Government Accountability Office report**, legislators cut EPA’s funding for cleanup of Superfund sites by nearly half since the late 1990s.